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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that there is available in contemporary philosophy a foundation for an ethic of communication that avoids the naive belief in absolutes and yet provides a coherent, defensible, and practical set of standards to guide communication choices. The philosophers and philosophies identified are Hans-Georg Gadamer and his discussion of linguisticality and Martin Buber and his belief in philosophical anthropology. Discussion of these philosophies as they relate to communication is provided and it is noted that ethical communication can be defined as communication that promotes the realization of the potential of the person and that relativism can be considered part of communication and not a problem. (MKM)

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Communication, Ethics, and Relativism: An Interpersonal Perspective

John Stewart

"relative" Not absolute or existing by itself. From referre, past participle of the Latin relatus, "to refer."

The Reverend Jim Jones communicated effectively enough to lead hundreds of his followers to their deaths. The Ayatollah Khomeini persuaded an overwhelming majority of Iranians to replace the Shah with an Islamic republic which attempted to re-establish political stability, in part, by executing hundreds of its enemies. Virtually all would agree that the communication that contributed to the massacres in Jonestown and Teheran was ethically reprehensible. But Jim Jones also communicated effectively enough with Detroit's city government to win dignity and jobs for his followers, and many of the Ayatollah's reforms have been similarily productive. In each case, when and how did "good" communication go "bad"?

The facile response is "whenever people died," but even brief reflection unmasks the limits of that simplistic ethic. In the first place, such an ethic is probably ethnocentric. Although reverence for the individual human life may be a fundamental value in western white cultures, one must ask whether we have the right to impose it on cultures radically different from our own. That standard may also be hypocritical. In order to apply it consistently, one must condemn not only the deaths in Jonestown and Teheran but also each loss of human life from abortion, self-defense, capital punishment, euthanasia, voluntary suicide, and martyrdom. It is very difficult as a practical matter to affirm the absolute value of the individual human life in all situations. Perhaps most importantly, such a standard only works when human life is actually at risk. It ignores the countless cases where ethical decisions need to be made about communication that is not life-threatening.

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But if the human life standard won't work, how can we judge the ethical merit of communication? Almost every student of rhetoric has had to grapple with this question. And the textbook and classroom discussions reveal that virtually everyone wants the same thing: a sure-fire way to decide, an absolute standard that will unerringly guide good conduct, an ethical yardstick to measure communication efforts in all situations.

The problem is exacerbated by some contemporary theorizing about communication. Sociologists of knowledge and rhetorical theorists argue that rhetoric is epistemic, that "knowledge" and "truth" are products of the communication that brings them into being. In the words of philosopher Charles Taylor, one must recognize "the artificialty of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality. The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is."[1]

But if we cannot appeal to the sanctity of human life, and if knowledge and truth are linguistically relative, what general criterion can we use to judge the ethical merit of communication? In the words of the announcement of this convention program, if "no one view of the world can be offered as the one and only way to understand the human condition. . ., how can one ethically judge a Hitler or a cannibal?"

I believe that we can best respond to this perennial problem first by recognizing how the way we ask the question contributes to the difficulty of responding to it, and then by explaining how two contemporary philosophers of interpersonal communication, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Buber, offer a way out of what sometimes seems to be an inescapable morass.

A first step toward an interpersonal response to the question of communication ethics and relativism is to recognize the position we've taken

by the very way we've framed the issue. When we identify relativism as a problem for communication ethics, we implicitly affirm at least the following propositions:

(a) That there is or could be an absolute ethical standard or set of standards which, as the definition of "relative" indicates. exists "by itself" and is not dependent on "referring." Such a standard could be applied regardless of the communication context and the communication content.

(b) That adhering to such a context- and content-independent standard or set of standards would be desirable. The stronger thesis would be that such adherence would always be desirable. The weaker thesis would be that such adherence would be preferable in most cases.

(c) That the alternative, that is, being guided by context- and/or content-dependent standards is undesirable.

A good share of this paper is intended to question the position outlined in (a), (b), and (c). Suffice it to say at this point that such a position is one current manifestation of the 19th century "theory of progress," the view that all problems of human experience can and will ultimately be solved by the application of human technology and insight. Given the successes of the industrial revolution and the promise of modern science, unlimited progress looked reasonable in the 19th century. Today our communication theory acknowledges the radically context- and content-dependent, systemic, and processual nature of our subject matter, and affirms the inappropriateness of a covering law approach to communication, but it appears that our ethical perspective does not.[2]

In other words, part of the problem is that our ethical understanding has not kept up with the rest of our theorizing about communication. In the second half of the 20th century, the theory of progress and its concomitant absolutistic orientation--reflected in positivism and logical empiricism--have been rejected as foundations for communication research. Relativism is

no longer anathema. When communication scholars affirm the epistemic function of rhetoric, their position entails the belief that knowledge is a social phenomenon relative to the persons, times, and circumstances to which it comes into being. Constructivism is another contemporary perspective which emphasizes the importance of individual and social factors on reality formulation and assessment. And hermeneutic phenomenology, one of the most recent perspectives contributing to communication scholarship, underscores the inescapable relativism of knowledge in all the human studies. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, "the standards of truth by which the content of consensus can be judged. . .can be only the ideal standards of rational discourse."[3] The contrast between enthusiastic endorsement of relativist views of communication theory and our apprehensive mistrust of any relativist ethic is striking.

Pointing the Way Out

Is it misguided? I think so. There is available in contemporary philosophy a foundation for an ethic of communication which avoids the naive belief in absolutes and yet provides a coherent, defensible, and practicable set of standards to guide communication choices. One major component of that foundation is Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of linguisticality; another is Martin Buber's philosophical anthropology.

Gadamer's contribution. Gadamer echoes some contemporary rhetoricians when he argues that language is not simply a tool that humans use to accomplish their ends or express their emotions. Language, he says, is the medium through which we become who we are. Our experience is fundamentally linguistic; we do not first perceive a thing and then name it; rather linguisticality is what originally directs our experience itself.

Historically, says Gadamer, we have believed otherwise. Semantics has been viewed as a doctrine of linguistic signs. The user of language has been urged to "master his or her tools." "But actual speaking," Gadamer argues, "is more than the choice of means to achieve some purpose in communication. The language one masters is such that one lives within it, that is, 'knows' what one wishes to communicate in no way other than in linguistic form."[4] He summarizes his position by arguing that "reality does not happen 'behind the back' of language; . . . rather . . . reality happens precisely within the language."[5] In Truth and Method he puts the same point this way: "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all."[6]

Gadamer clarifies his point in part by exploring the distinction between "Welt" or world and "Umwelt" or habitat. Creatures live in a habitat, a surround or environment into which they are placed with which they must cope. But we have no evidence to indicate that creatures have an attitude toward or any freedom from that habitat. It is different with persons. In Gadamer's words,

> To have "world" means to have an attitude towards it. To have an attitude towards the world, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one is able to present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is both the having of a "world" and the having of language.
>
> . . .unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by freedom from habitat. This freedom includes the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what comes to meet us from the world means to have language and to have "world."[7]

Gadamer emphasizes that this "language" through which we constitue "world" is not the langue that was a primary interest to DeSaussure but something closer to parole, conversation, language as it establishes and maintains interhuman contact. "Language has its true being only in conversation," he writes, "in the exercise of understanding between people. . . . in linguistic communication 'world' is disclosed. . . . Thus the world is the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who speak with one another. . . . For language, in its nature, is the language of conversation, but it acquires its reality only in the process of communicating."[8]

Gadamer's philosophical account of linguisticality--the communicating in which language and persons come into being--elucidates our familiar view of communication as process or open system. He emphasizes that linguisticality always occurs in a context of "fore-meanings" or prejudices, that is, the process is always materially affected by the expectations, attitudes, backgrounds, etc. of its participants; it is inescapably context-dependent. He notes that it is also "open," both in the sense of an "open system"--characterized by synergy, equifinality, and interdependence--and in the sense that it is never finished, there is never a complete understanding or a cosmically "finished" interpretation. And he makes especially good use of the notion of "play." Language and persons come into being in the play of conversation, a game which is never "definitive"--just as no bridge or soccer contest is ever the definitive one--or "exhaustive"--the game of baseball is never exhausted, despite the number of times it is played. Moreover, there is a reciprocal relationship between the players and the game; we are "played by" language as much as we "play" it.

In short, Gadamer's account both emphasizes the ontological significance of linguisticality and celebrates its "relativism." Openness, subjectivity, "occasionality," and context-dependence are all inescapable characteristics of the activity of languaging. None is a "problem" to be overcome; all are simply demensions of the process of being.

So are we left without any stable footing? Is every communication event a completely new experience? Are there no ethical guidelines that transcend the specific communication context? Neither Gadamer nor Buber leaves us in that precarious a situation. Gadamer's notion of "play" leads naturally to a consideration of the transcendent element of all games, their rules. Several philosophers, sociologists, and communication scholars are pursuing that line of inquiry in an effort to respond to the kind of question we are addressing here. Unfortunately, at this point, the game analogy and rules approach have been more intuitively appealing and provocative than they have been productive. So far we don't have even the beginnings of a set of rules for any communication game. That is part of the reason why I want to suggest an alternative.

Buber's contribution. Martin Buber's philosophical anthropology offers the foundation for an ethic of communication which avoids the pitfalls of a simplistic absolutism, responds to the need for a durable standard, and appears to be considerably more practical than current efforts to draft systems of rules for communication games. Buber's approach begins with a simple but important move. Instead of looking to the situation for elements that transcend various communication events, he looks to the communicators. Thus Buber's ethic is grounded not in an analysis of contexts or topics but in an explication of what it is to be a person, that is, in a philosophical anthropology.

As I outlined in another paper[9] Buber's approach adumbrates Husserlian phenomenology in a crucial way. Husserl and his successors base their analysis of the human situation of their understanding of the subject-object relationship; the meeting between noesis and noema is seen as the fundamental datum to which all the activities of intentional consciousness can be reduced and from which grow phenomenological metaphysics and epistemology. Buber sets this entire objectivating function of human consciousness "into an essential tension with a more original, reciprocal, and non-objectivating mode of awareness."[10] Alongside and in tension with the subject-object mode of consciousness, Buber discovered a primal human capacity for subject-subject awareness. His most important work, I and Thou, begins with an affirmation of this anthropological insight: "The world is twofold for man," Buber writes, "in accordance with his twofold attitude."[11] In other words, like Husserl and Heidegger, Buber begins his analysis with intentional consciousness, but he proceeds to clarify how, for persons, this consciousness is bimodal. Although he emphasizes the importance of both modes--subject-object (I-It) and subject-subject (I-Thou)--he insists that his historical situation demands that he emphasize the need for I-Thou contact. As he writes, "In another hour, it would perhaps have been granted to me to sound the praises of the It; today not . . . ."[12]

The bulk of Buber's work is dedicated to explicating his contribution to philosophical anthropology, the subject-subject (I-Thou) relationship. In his foundational essay "Distance and Relation," written nine years before Gadamer's Truth and Method, Buber employs the same distinction Gadamer does between "Welt" and "Umwelt." "An animal exists only in an Umwelt. Its organism," Buber writes, "gathers continuously or continually, the elements which meet the necessities and wants of its life, in order to construct

from them the circle of its existence. . . . It is only man who replaces this unsteady conglomeration. . .by a unity which can be imagined or thought by him as existing for itself. . . . With him, with this human life, a world exists."[13] The crucial difference is that human's ability both to distance the environment and to enter into relation with it. Buber characterizes the "act and the work of entering into relation with the world as such"as a "synthesizing apperception. . .by synthesizing apperception I mean the apperception of a being as a whole and as a unity."[14]

Buber's explanation of the role of language in this dynamic also foreshadowed Gadamer's. Relation occurs, says Buber, in the speaking of one of the primal word-pairs, I-It or I-Thou. He does not mean that the event requires the utterance of those syntactical units but that it is made possible by and realized through the exercise of human languaging. Human communication, in other words, functions ontologically. "Basic words [I-It, I-Thou] do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken they establish a mode of existence."[15] Buber's and Gadamer's insights are remarkably similar.

Buber goes well beyond Gadamer, however, to develop a perspective on persons, a philosophical anthropology, and it is that part of his work in which we can ground an ethic of communication. He first presented his perspective in I and Thou, where he announced and explicated his understanding of our bimodal (I-It, I-Thou) consciousness. Near the end of the first part of this work Buber summarizes what is perceived in each of these modes and, in the process, outlines what distinguishes personal from non- or im-personal being.

The world of "things," which includes beings perceived as things, consists

> of qualities. . .recorded in terms of spatial coordinates, and processes recorded in terms of temporal coordinates, things and processes that are bounded by other things and processes and capable of being measured against and compared with those others--an ordered world, a detailed world. This world is somewhat reliable; it has density and duration; its articulation can be surveyed; one can get it . . again and again; one recounts it with one's eyes closed and then checks with one's eyes open. . . . it is your object and remains that, according to your pleasure. . . . It is only <u>about</u> it that you can come to an understanding with others. . . . Without it you cannot remain alive; its reliability perserves you; but if you were to die into it, then you would be buried in nothingness.[16]

One can also perceive parts of the world, especially another person, as a subject, "Thou" or "You," and when that occurs one encounters

> always <u>one</u> being. . . . Measure and comparison have fled. . . . The world that appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it comes even when not called and vanishes even when you cling to it. It cannot be surveyed: if you try to make it surveyable you lose it. . . . You cannot come to an understanding <u>about</u> it with others. . . . The It-world hangs together in space and time. The You-world does not hang together in space and time.[17]

In chapters of two textbooks I have summarized and developed the view Buber outlines in these paragraphs by contrasting objects, which are interchangeable, measurable (that is, able to be exhaustively described in spatiotemporal terms), reactive, and unreflective with persons, who are unique, more than spatiotemporal, capable of choice, and reflective.[18] I have argued that the key to inter-personal communication is the participants' mutual and reciprocal willingness and ability to perceive and treat themselves and each other in subject-subject (I-Thou) rather than exclusively subject-object (I-It) ways. The approach to interpersonal communication taken in Bridges Not Walls and Together: Communicating Interpersonaliy builds on this foundation.

Buber also built an ethic of communication on this foundation. One notable characteristic of his ethic is that he rejects both horns of the dilemma implied in the announcement of the convention program. When confronted with a Jonestown or Teheran, we seem to be caught between the Scylla of objective absolutism and the Charybdis of a groundless subjective relativism. But Buber explained the inaccuracy of both alternatives. As his translator Maurice Friedman clarifies, those who posit "objective" values as ethical norms "ignore the fact that a value is always a value for a person rather than something with an absolute, independent existence."[19] The other alternative, subjectivism, tends in Friedman's words "To make the 'is' equal to the 'ought': it implies that one 'ought' to accept the values of his cultural group just because they are those values, or that one 'ought' to follow subjective interests just because one has this interest."[20] The central problem is that both objectivism and subjectivism ignore the inherently relational nature of human beings; since to be a person is to be

in relation, neither objectivism nor subjectivism is, literally, possible. Values lie where human being occurs, in the between, the relation of I and other. In Friedman's words,

> It is the domination of subjective-objective thinking that has produced the traditional but false dichotomy between "selfishness" and "unselfishness," egoism and altrusim. There can be no such thing as pure "self"ishness since no self originates or exists in isolation from others. . . . On the other hand, since in every action we enter into relations with others which involve both ourselves and them, there can be no such thing as pure "unself"ishness. . . .
>
> One cannot divide up a relationship into two separate parts one of which is "mine" and one of which is "thine" and then choose between them. One can only choose by one's actions and attitudes to move in the direction of relationship and reciprocity--I-Thou--for separateness and mutual exploitation--I-It.[21]

As these last two sentences clearly imply, there is a direct line from Buber's explication of the relational nature of persons--his philosophical anthropology--to his ethics of communication. Given his relational view of the nature of persons, the central tenet of ethical communication is responsibility, so long as the reader understands, as Buber puts it, that "Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding."[22] Responsibility, in other words, means response-ability. Moral human action is responsive human action; we engender the good when we are attentive to the world as it addresses us--Buber refers to the "speech" of the world--not so that we can "master" it but in such a way that we contact what is

unique and we answer from who we are. Such occurrences are not extraordinary or mystical; rather, Buber emphasizes, they are "the events of the personal everyday life" in the office, classroom, factory, or home. "In them, as they now are, 'great' or 'small', we are addressed, and those which count as great yield no greater signs than the others."[23]

Each ethical choice is situation-specific; one can only ably respond if one allows the concrete, particular, and individual person and context to significantly affect one's attitudes and actions. Moreover, there is no expectation of perfection, no "absolutely good" response. What is possible is what Buber calls "quancum statis," "that which this [person] is this hour of his life able to fulfill and to receive--if he gives himself."[25] No setting is so brutalizing as to prohibit all responding; neither is any earthly context so unbounded as to permit perfect responding. Buber is concerned with the vast range between heaven and hell: "with the turbid, the repressed, the pedestrian, with toil and dull contrariness--and with the breakthrough. . . . Whither? Into nothing exhalted, heroic or holy, into no Either and no Or, only into this tiny strictness and grace of everyday. . . ."[25]

In short, Buber's ethic is clearly not just relativistic, because it is grounded in his ontology of dialogue. All persons in all historical and geographic contexts are relational beings. But it is also not absolutistic, because what is ethical in each concrete case depends on what is possible and on what occurs between the persons in contact. In that sense, the situation controls. As James Mundackal summarizes,

> Human life is a series of dialogical situations. Responsibility is set into the conditioned nature of the situation. But it is not an arbitrary ethic of the moment. However, there is no

> written code of rules as to how I have to respond to each concrete dialogical situation which is unique, unforseeable and unrepeatable. . . . [I pursue the good when I am] responding to it responsibly. . . .[26]

Conclusion

So long as we search for ethical standards in the communication content or context we will continue to struggle with the problem of relativism. Only when we begin from a different starting point will we escape the subjectivist-objectivist dilemma. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Buber offer that alternative, a philosophical anthropology which can ground a durable and practical ethic of communication. These philosophers clarify that to be a person is to-be-in-relation, that humanness occurs in the interhuman contact of languaging. Conversation, in other words, functions ontologically; Welt supersedes Umwelt in interpersonal address and response. That dynamic transcends all situations and topics; it describes every human's living.

The ethic which emerges from this perspective on persons is grounded in response-ability. Since each communication contact has person-building potential, ethical communication is communication which promotes the realization of that potential. Such communication is responsive, attentive to and concretely guided by as much as possible of one's own and the other's humanness, that is, uniqueness, choice-making, more-than-spatiotemporal aspects, and reflexivity.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Charles M. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1977), p. 117.

[2]An important exception is Walter Fisher's award-winning essay, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (December 1978), 376-384. Fisher affirms that ethical questions are endemic to all rhetorical communication: ". . . whatever is taken as a basis for adopting a rhetorical message is inextricably bound to a value--to a conception of the 'good'" (378, n. 18). He also argues that "consensus about [value judgments] will never be realized and that no analytically grounded hierarchy of values will ever claim universal adherence" (376-377).

[3]Zygmunt Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 245.

[4]Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 87.

[5]Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 401.

[6]Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 35.

[7]Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 402.

[8]Ibid., p. 404.

[9]"Foundations of Dialogic Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (April 1978), 183-201.

[10]Allan Clark in dialogue with Helen Martin Felton, "Martin Buber, Experience, and Dialogue," ed. John Stewart (unpubl. ms., 1979), p. 5.

[11]Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 53.

[12]Martin Buber, "Replies to My Critics," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, ed. Paul Arthus Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1967), p. 704.

[13]Martin Buber, "Distance and Relation," in The Knowledge of Man, ed. Maurice Friedman, trans. Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 61.

[14]Ibid., p. 62

[15]Buber, I and Thou, p. 53. Italics added.

[16]Ibid., pp. 82-83.

[17]Ibid., pp. 83-84.

[18]Bridges Not Walls, 2nd ed., ed. John Stewart, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1977), pp. 2-25; John Stewart and Gary D'Angelo, Together: Communicating Interpersonally, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980), see especially Chapters 1 and 4.

[19]Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 200.

[20]Ibid., p. 201.

[21]Ibid., p. 203.

[22]Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (new York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 16.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., p. 36.

[25]Ibid.

[26]James Mundackal, Man in Dialogue (Alwaye, Kerala, India: Little Flower Study House, 1977), p. 189.